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Friday's Feature

By

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Mulches for the landscape

When pine needles start raining down, many gardeners' thoughts turn to mulch. A mulch is any material applied to the soil surface for protection or improvement of the area covered. But when it comes to mulching flower beds and under shrubs, pine products aren't the only choices.

Proper mulching has many beneficial effects on the soil and plants. Mulches prevent loss of water from the soil by evaporation. Mulching will prevent crusting of the soil surface, thus improving absorption and percolation of water into the soil and at the same time, reducing erosion. Mulch acts as an insulator, keeping the soil cool under intense sunlight and warm during cold spells. Mulches can also suppress weeds when the mulch material itself is weed-free and is applied deeply enough to prevent weed seed germination.

Mulch material is usually categorized as either organic or inorganic. Organic mulches include bark, wood chips, leaves, pine needles, grass clippings or other similar natural material. Organic mulch has one very important advantage over inorganic mulch—it improves the health of the soil. Because organic mulches decay over time they add very important nutrients to our soil.

Inorganic mulches include such materials as gravel, marble chips, shells, pebbles and stones. Though sometimes used because they are permanent and attractive, inorganic mulches do have some disadvantages. Clean-up of leaves, needles, and twigs can be difficult. They do not break down so they provide no benefit to the soil. And if limestone products or shells are used, they can increase the soil pH often to detrimental levels.

Which is the right mulch for you? According to one survey, gardeners want mulches to be attractive, last a long time and not attract insects. Currently, about sixty percent of the mulch sold for the home landscape in Florida is cypress and twenty percent is pine-bark mulch.

While cypress mulch is very popular, it may not be your best choice. Today, cypress trees are harvested for two major products: saw timber and landscape mulch. Of the approximately forty-two million cubic feet of cypress harvested each year in Florida, almost half is chipped for landscape mulch. Originally the cypress mulch industry began by using waste wood produced from sawing operations. However, with the expansion of mulch-use in landscaping in the last several years came an increase in demand for cypress mulch. This growing use of cypress for mulch has contributed considerably to the harvesting of trees from the wild depleting our valuable wetlands.

One alternative to cypress mulch is melaleuca mulch. The use of melaleuca would be wise, since it is an invasive, exotic tree invading more than 500,000 acres of Florida's wetlands. Commercial melaleuca mulch, which has been composted for ninety days before bagging in order to kill the seeds, is some of the most environmentally-friendly and termite-resistant mulch on the market. And while University of Florida research

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indicates that termites tend to be present in mulched areas more frequently than in areas where mulch is nonexistent, results indicate that termites preferred melaleuca less than some of the other mulches.

There are however certain practices you can adopt to help deter termites when using mulch. Do not place landscape plantings too close to exterior walls and leave a mulch-free area around the building by pulling the mulch at least one foot away from walls.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names in this article is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.